

# **MEMO**

## **FACT CHECKING PROTOCOL**

**08.14.18**

**FROM: Les Zaitz**

Accuracy is essential in all stories.

The most common error is with names.

Other errors creep in when we transpose a number, misread a date, or misunderstand what a source or document tells us.

Perfection is ideal, of course, but not very human. We can take steps, however, to drive up our odds of getting it right. Please follow these steps whenever possible. They are mandatory for enterprise or investigative work.

1. When any story is in final, edited form, double-check the spelling and title of every name against a source document – your notes, an online agency website, or some authoritative source. Double-check every number and date against source material.
2. Compare quotes in your story with quotes in your notes. We do not rewrite quotes to make them work better. If the written quote varies from that in your notes, edit the quote to reflect the actual quote or paraphrase.
3. Check your sourcing for any declarative sentence: The school bus crashed through the retaining wall. Who said it was a school bus? Or was it a charter?
4. If you have ANY doubt about the accuracy of any fact, ACT ON THAT DOUBT. Your gut instinct gives you a good internal warning system. Don't gamble. Don't assume. Check whatever is troubling you to be sure it is right. You will sleep better that night without a doubt.
5. For major stories – enterprise, investigative, in-depth profiles and the like – reporters are required to contact those referred to in the story with a request for review. This is the case regardless of whether someone agreed to talk to us. ESPECIALLY in sensitive stories where a person declined to talk, we are nonetheless going to reach out to provide them an opportunity to verify facts we are about to report on them. The process for doing so:
  - a. Craft an email to the source, using the language on the example below.
  - b. Go through the story and identify any statement that is sourced to the individual or refers to the individual. (*Bob Brown built the first indoor dirigible in 2010.*) quoted directly or indirectly.
  - c. Copy the statement into the email – see the example below.
  - d. Set the deadline for a response. If possible, give them 48 hours. If you are on deadline, set the most reasonable deadline possible that puts them on notice to the information and their opportunity to respond.
  - e. When you get a response, evaluate any suggested changes. Sources will often want to rewrite a quote or edit the statements otherwise. That's not allowed. If they assert a factual error, either correct it or verify otherwise that your original information stands as accurate.

- f. Keep any response with your notes for the story.

This practice has several benefits:

1. It avoids error.
2. It builds credibility – that you are willing to take this step to be accurate.
3. It safeguards against claims that sources weren't told what was being reported.

If you have any questions, please ask. This process is not intended to limit our reporting, but rather to make it accurate in every aspect.

***Here is an example of a fact-checking email:***

At the Enterprise, we strive for fairness and accuracy in our reports. I am sharing draft excerpts for our impending story about how your agency handled the Montwheeler evaluation. Please review each statement for factual accuracy. If you see an error, please identify the error and provide what you believe to be the correct information. At this juncture, I am not seeking additional information or comments. To be considered, please provide your response by the close of business on Wednesday, May 9. Thank you.

Les Zaitz  
Editor & Publisher  
Malheur Enterprise  
office: (541) 473-3377  
cell: (541) 620-0933

***STATEMENTS TO VERIFY FOR FACTUAL ACCURACY:***

1. On Jan. 11, the 37-page evaluation landed in the in the Malheur County Circuit Court case file of State v. Montwheeler. Such case files typically are open to the public, accessible online or at the courthouse. In this instance, state court officials elected to block public access to the report.
2. Marilee Aldred, administrator of the Malheur County Circuit Court, said she was withholding the document to protect Montwheeler's privacy and because it was a medical record.
3. Under Oregon law, Aldred is considered the "custodian" of the court file and responsible for applying the state's public records law. After she declined the newspaper's request, the Enterprise petitioned Rosenblum, seeking an order that evaluation be disclosed to the public.